

Filipino Teachers' Experiences of Supportive Relationships with Colleagues: A Narrative-biographical Inquiry*

Sr. Ramona M. Viernes, O.P.

University of Santo Tomas
Philippines

Allan B. de Guzman

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore teachers' experiences of supportive relationships with colleagues. A total of fifty (50) public and private elementary and secondary school teachers in the central part of the Philippines were purposively selected as respondents. Guided by a narrative-biographical interview, results of the study yielded four significant themes that describe how Filipino teachers as relational people experience and interpret supportive relationships in the school setting. These include: supportive relationships as (1) a life-giving force; (2) an extension of one's family; (3) a reciprocal process; and (4) a work still in progress.

Key Words: supportive relationships, teachers, Filipino teachers, narrative-biographical interview

Bainer and Didham (1994) in a study entitled, "Mentoring and Other Support Behaviors in Elementary Schools" posit that supportive relationships in the workplace have always been a significant concern for workers. The same study revealed the results of a Gallup poll conducted on 1,200 workers who ranked supportive relationships as among the 10 strongest motivational factors, higher than money and status. In the school setting, supportive relationships serve many functions, among which are: relationships with adult teachers

Allan B. de Guzman, Director, University of Santo Tomas Center for Educational Research and Development and Professor UST College of Education and Graduate School; He is one of the research fellows of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (INNOTECH). **Sr. Ramona Viernes**, a school principal in Tarlac City, Philippines, obtained her Ph.D. degree in Development Studies from the UST Graduate School. *This paper is a segment of her dissertation entitled: Evolving a Continuum of Filipino Teachers' Worldview of Pedagogy based on the Narrative-Biographical and Micro-Political Perspectives.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Allan B. de Guzman, UST Center for Educational Research and Development Room 201 Thomas Aquinas Research Complex, España, Manila, Philippines (1008). Electronic mail may be sent to abdeguzman@mnl.ust.edu.ph Telefax +63-02-3140852

have been shown to socialize new teachers (Kremer-Hazon & Ben-Peretz, 1986; Lortie, 1975); increase teachers sense of efficacy (Newman, Rutter, & Smith, 1989; Parkay, Greenwood, Olejnik, & Prololler, 1988) and professional growth (Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986); and enhance awareness of resources, ideas, and skills (Reich, 1986). It has also been found by studies (Chubb, 1988; Little, 1982, Rosenholtz, 1985) that teachers with strong affiliation are more effective, hence, supportive relationships among teachers have also been linked to higher student achievement and improved classroom discipline (Cohen, & Osterweil, 1986; Little, 1982).

As a significant factor in the analysis of teacher performance, relationships with colleagues was also highlighted by Kelchtermans (1996) and linked it to the concept of good working conditions and as one of the categories of interests necessary to achieve maximum performance of professional tasks. As a social-professional interest, relationships with colleagues weigh more heavily in teachers' decisions compared to other interests (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).

While the supportive relationship has pedagogical implications, its cultural underpinnings may generate several insights once viewed in a school context where teachers'

concept of experience is understood through personal encounters and is not only mentally conceived. The Filipino teacher is a classic example of a relational genius. Through his constant dealings and encounters with administrators, colleagues, students and the community, he gets to understand his being and existence in the school setting. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to describe how basic education teachers demonstrate through their experiences, supportive relationships with their colleagues.

Methodology

Subjects of the Study

This study recognizes the important role of the teachers' career experiences in the development of their personality and pedagogical worldview, hence teachers who have been in the profession for five years or more but not over 35 years were chosen for the purposes of this study. Research literature on teacher education (Fuller, Synder, Chapman, & Hua, 1995; Jensen, Foster, & Eddy, 1997; Hatton, 1994; Johnston, 1993; Lange & Burroughs-Lange, 1994; Moje & Wade, 1997) noted that these teachers have had a considerable amount of experience, have developed coherent practical theories of practice, and have imbibed a high degree of self-confidence to talk about and share their views on the matter being inquired. Fifty (50) teachers representing the elementary (25) and secondary (25) levels from selected private and public schools in the province were chosen purposively as respondents. Representing the private schools, were seventeen (17) female teachers and eight (8) male teachers. Participants from the public schools were nineteen (19) females and six (6) males. The decision to include both genders in the study was motivated by the assumed differences in the perception of males and females. To ensure that the whole province was represented, schools from the four (4) geographical points, that is, the east, west, north, and south, as well as the central part of the province were selected.

Study Instruments and Procedures

Constituting the main data gathering instrument for this qualitative inquiry was the semi-structured, narrative-biographical interview intended to stimulate the teachers to look back, recall and reflect on their career experiences (Autobiographical), and narratively construct (thematization)

the meaning of these experiences (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Kelchtermans, 1993, 1994), integrating them into their knowledge, understanding and teaching practice (Adalbjarnardottir & Sellman, 1997).

Before the interview, the researchers solicited the permission of the teacher-respondents to audio-tape the interview. In the presence of a cassette recorder, the teacher respondents were nervous and fidgety, but soon relaxed and settled down, allowing the interview to proceed smoothly. The respondents were candid enough to admit the anxiety because that was their first encounter with a qualitative research exercise and were scared they will not be able to answer the questions. However, when the researchers explained the type of questions (Table 1) they were going to be asked, they soon became comfortable, and answered the questions with enthusiasm.

Table 1. *Interview Questions*

1. Do you have plans to leave your teaching career? What have you experienced so far that keeps you in the profession?
2. Describe your relationships with your colleagues.
3. How do you and your colleagues support each other? In what way has your relationship with your colleagues created problems or tensions? How are you affected by what your colleagues say or do to you?

Analysis of Data

Transcripts of the interview were read carefully to enable the researchers to internalize and recall the prevailing atmosphere during the interview. This internalization was necessary for the researchers to identify the significant statements, descriptions, and expressions made by the respondents about the topic discussed during the interview.

Since the interview questions were semi-structured, the respondents spoke freely of their experiences of relationships with their colleagues both in and outside of the classroom and the school. The respondents intelligently admitted the presence of destructive elements of relationships in the school but readily quipped that these are endemic in all social organizations.

Data yielded by the interviews were subjected to both within case and cross-case analyses to find out the internal coherence of the teachers' responses vis-à-vis the meaningfulness and saliency of statements.

Results

Overall, findings indicate four (4) themes. Supportive relationships as: (1) a life-giving-force; (2) an extension of one's family; (3) a reciprocal process; and (4) a work still in progress.

Supportive Relationships as life-giving force

All the interviewees consider supportive relationships with colleagues as an integral component of the teaching profession. At the time of the interview, a majority of the respondents did not have other professional plans aside from teaching. They did not entertain the idea of leaving the profession because of their close affinity with their colleagues. One of the respondents clearly stated the sentiment in the following statement:

"One of the reasons why I stayed this long in the profession is the support of my colleagues."

"My good relationship with them gives me the inner drive to stay in the profession and perform at my level best."

A female respondent, who was due to give birth in one month's time at the time of the interview, had this to say:

"I don't feel like taking a leave of absence and stay home because I will miss my school family."

Table 2. Relationships with Colleagues

1. *We are like a big family. The camaraderie is great.*
2. *I really take care of my relationship with my colleagues. I am always open to them.*
3. *I have a harmonious relationship with my colleagues. All of them are very accommodating.*
4. *I treat the senior teachers as my mother and my colleagues who are at my age as my brothers and sisters.*
5. *I am the life of the party.*
6. *I relate well with my colleagues because some of them were my former teachers in high school.*
7. *We work as a family, one big community.*
8. *The junior teachers call me "daddy."*
9. *I was voted twice as faculty president. That speaks for the kind of relationship I have with my colleagues.*
10. *My colleagues are my second family.*

Supportive Relationships as an Extension of One's Family

When asked by the researchers to describe their relationships with their colleagues, the respondents readily shared their experiences. Table 2 records the following significant statements.

Supportive Relationships as a Reciprocal Process

Collegial support of any kinds and forms, abound in a healthy school environment. The respondents expressed willingness and availability to extend to colleagues not only professional but financial, spiritual, emotional, and moral assistance as well.

Two of the respondents, who finished their secondary education in the school where they are now employed, expressed willingness and availability to assist their colleagues as a way of paying back what the former teachers had done for them when they were students. The traditional and revered Filipino value of "*utang-na-loob*" or reciprocity is very much alive in the respondents' attitude.

A respondent who holds a position in her religious organization revealed that more than the professional help she extends to colleagues, she feels more fulfilled when co-workers approach her for spiritual advice and enlightenment. In fact, she considers this to be her most important contribution to the school. However, she is quick to explain that proselytizing is not the motive of her actions. It is her way of spreading the message of faith and hope because she considers teaching as a mission.

One respondent who teaches in the elementary level acknowledges her inadequacy with the English language. The humility to accept her limitations was admirable, as was her tendency to ask assistance from her colleagues as regards the use of correct grammar when she constructs test questions and assignments for her pupils. She reveals that she has been doing this for years and was very much thankful that her colleagues had never let her down. This willingness and availability of her colleagues is one of the reasons why, despite her limitations, she never entertained the idea of giving up.

Supportive relationships really become evident whenever activities happen in the school. Respondents admitted to giving up their individual differences and preferences whenever the name and prestige of the school is at stake. Again, all of the respondents acknowledge that school activities such as academic contests, sports competitions, inter-visitations, intramurals and other school

festivities bring them to cooperate, support, and work with one another to a higher degree.

Supportive Relationships as a Work still in Progress

Though the respondents spoke highly of their relationships with colleagues, they were candid enough to acknowledge that tensions and conflicts arise in the workplace. However, they have learned to accept these as part of their daily life as teachers and are not seriously bothered by them. A number of respondents intimated they are not affected by these problems. Their attitude however, does not mean that the negative effects of these disruptive relationships in the teaching-learning process are ignored or taken for granted. On the contrary, it is precisely for the negative effects resulting from the conflicts that the respondents deliberately chose not to be affected at all. As one of the respondents said:

"If I will dwell on the conflicts and problems, then I don't have anymore the chance to grow and develop as a teacher."

Interestingly, some of the respondents admitted to being affected by relational problems but only for a brief period of time. As one of them emphatically said:

"There are times when I, too, lose control of myself and utter harsh words, but after a while, I realize that it is unprofessional for me to have done that. I do not stay long in that emotional state because the pupils suffer."

This study found that the respondents' readiness to overcome these conflicts and minimize the negative effects on their professional practice has always been the focus of their efforts. As previously mentioned, the capacity to tear down walls of difference and build bridges to reach out to their colleagues comes naturally to the teacher respondents and the greatest consideration always are the learners.

Discussion

This study succeeded in its attempt to describe how teachers in both elementary and secondary school experience supportive relationships in the workplace. Though the respondents are obviously affected by problems that arise in their relationships, they confided that the fulfillment and satisfaction they derived from supportive relationships far

outweigh the frustrations resulting from conflicts. Indeed, peer support has been associated with job satisfaction and retention among teachers (Bloland & Selby, 1980; Knoop & O'Reilly, 1978; Metzke, 1988; Theobald, 1989). Interactions with colleagues are the teachers' most valued form of professional stimulation as claimed by Yee (1990), and the most important factor in their professional development (Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986; Singh & Shifflette, 1996). Conversely, lack of it results in teachers' low job satisfaction (Friesen, Prokop, & Sarros, 1988) and is cited as one of the major reasons of teachers' leaving the profession (Alexander, Adams, & Martray, 1983; Lortie, 1975).

Filipinos are family-oriented people. They put so much emphasis on the support of the family as a factor of success to whatever endeavors the members choose. It is no surprise therefore, that relationships in the school take on a family orientation where colleagues are considered as mother, a father, brothers and sisters, and learners are treated as children. This is the reason why, more than the intellectual or professional help they extend to colleagues, respondents also provide financial, spiritual, emotional and moral assistance. (Grant & Sleeter, 1985; Singh & Billingsley, 1998).

The respondents' concept of the workplace as a family and as a community added to the significance of relationships as a strong influence in their teaching practice. Interactions with colleagues are seen not as an obligation but a part and parcel of their being a teacher and a member of the school family. With this consideration in mind, the respondents' are willing to endure the difficulties inherent in the teaching profession with the assurance that there are people who would help them out and they are even more willing to create an atmosphere conducive to an effective teaching-learning process. This idea of a conducive atmosphere is aptly described as ***knowledge communities*** by Olson and Craig (2001), where relationships among teachers become the expression and enactment of their personal practical knowledge that develops as they learn to reconstruct meaning in their interactions with one another (Ayers, 1980; Casey, 1993; Paley, 1979).

The support they give to one another is already a kind of empowerment though still in a limited context. The seeming lack of awareness on how empowerment is felt and experienced by the teacher respondents, implies the need to see teachers not as persons to work on but as persons to work with in the task of educating the students. A healthy school environment provides teachers rich academic opportunities and exposes them to activities where their expertise is

maximized and where their decision-making power is exercised.

Conclusions

The general psyche of the Filipinos as warm and relational people is affirmed by the findings of this study. Transcendental in orientation, the Filipino, in general, and the Filipino teacher, in particular, remains an active vessel that actively seeks harmony, unison, rapport, especially affinity with people. A Filipino is judged as a good person in the measure that he or she is able to relate with a wide range of personalities in and outside of his own circle. The respondents seem to be very much aware of this idea and consequently use the same criteria in their relations with colleagues. On the whole, the results of this qualitative inquiry disclosed a clear though subjective essence of supportive relationships as a process. As both a pedagogical and cultural construct, a supportive relationship is viewed as a life-giving force, an extension of one's family, a reciprocal process, and a work still in progress.

Today, more than ever, supportive relationships in the school setting remain of paramount value to the teachers in that all possible efforts should be directed towards creating an environment conducive to more meaningful interactions and situation-alliances (Bainer & Didham, 1994). The primary purposes of this process is of course the improvement of teacher efficacy and effectiveness which consequently results in an improvement in learners' academic performance.

The effects and value of relationships in the workplace that vary among people depending on the culture of a particular context imply the need for other studies to be conducted exploring how cultural contexts relate to teacher performance and adjustment, with a view to understanding the phenomena of human relationships.

While it is true that some educational phenomena may be understood and interpreted from a positivist perspective where the accepted criteria of relevance and acceptability lie in objectivity, reliability and validity, the use of narrative-biographical inquiry, though subjective and descriptive, is a way to help teachers reflect on who they are and how their identities influence their teaching (Doecke, Brown and Loughran, 2000 & Gomez, Walker, Page, 2000). In this study, the teachers' personal practical knowledge as seen in their relationships with their colleagues is embodied as well as embedded within socio-cultural historical contexts. Finally, Olson (1995) posits that teachers are the authoritative source

of their experience and since they use their narrative knowledge to interpret and reinterpret their experience, each of them authors different stories at different times and in different circumstances.

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Received January 25, 2005

Revision received December 5, 2005

Accepted December 7, 2005